

Title: **Helpless**

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Chapter 1: Helpless

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Cordelia Chase couldn't believe her eyes.

Guy Matthews had grabbed a hold of her arm, and shoved her back against the tree so that a spark of agony flared in her side where it *wasn't healed yet*, his face held so close to hers that his breath gusted out across her neck, "Hey!" He'd snarled, his eyes flashing with injured pride and malice, "We're not through here!"

His daemon—some sort of huge white falcon *thing*—lunged with a shriek at Branshen, her talons sinking into his fur and the skin beneath with a ferocity that had them *both* crying out in pain. Branshen in a yowl that was louder than they were proud of, turning all heads toward their predicament, the air leaving her lungs in a choked gasp as though a foot had been

slammed into her stomach. Guy's daemon—what was her name? What was her name? Krae-something? Kraelara?—was buffeting at Branshen's head with her massive wings, and it felt as terrible as the time she'd fallen off the pyramid in cheer-leading practice, and cracked her head on the floor. She'd been in aching pain for days afterward, and had hardly been able to stand without help.

Then Buffy had come from nowhere, and grabbed *his* arm. The arm connected to the hand that was squeezing her arm hard enough for it to *hurt*. The Slayer's daemon—the lion that had both impressed and scared the snot out of them when they first met her—let out a snarl that was so fierce and filled with rage that even knowing it wasn't directed at *her*, her heart pounded in increased fear over the sharp, gleaming white fangs that were bared just inches away from her own daemon's throat, the lion's amber eyes locked on the falcon's face, a growl so low she could literally *feel it in her feet* rumbling in his throat. For a moment, no one moved.

Then Buffy tugged—*again*-on Guy's arm, and—
—Nothing happened.

His daemon's claws were still *in Branshen's back*, his fingers digging into her arm, and—

—Buffy tugged again, confusion and the beginnings of desperation on her face, and *disbelief*—

—And then Guy smirked, and released Cordelia's arm so that he could shove Buffy away—

—And Cordelia had been expecting a lot of things to

happen. She'd expected to see Buffy Summers flip the freaking sociopath over her shoulder. She expected to see the lion lunge forward at the falcon that held her daemon within its grasp, somehow both managing to shield her own daemon from harm while removing the threat at the same time, as she'd seen him do so many times before. The lion—somehow seeming so old and young at once, with his mane almost nothing more than a spiky ruff of fur around his face and down the back of his neck, but his fur *so covered in scars* that it looked as though he'd gone through a hundred thousand battles as the only survivor—had always managed to keep them out of harm's way, shielding Branshen from the monstrous undead *things* that weren't *daemons anymore* that rose from the grave with vampires, taking them down with vicious slashes with his claws and teeth.

Even before she'd grown to accept Buffy as a friend/enemy, she and Branshen had always held a wary respect for her and her daemon. No one with that many scars on their soul was someone to be messed with.

But this time, none of the things she'd been expecting happened.

Guy struck out with the back of his hand, and Buffy... Buffy was sent off her feet by the strength behind the blow, shoving her backwards and *off the ground* as she spun in an attempt to regain her footing from a *hit that shouldn't have even moved her an inch*.

Cordelia's view of what happened next was blocked

by Guy's face—because he was so close to her again, and he'd completely forgotten about Buffy—but there came a sharp *crack* of *something* hitting the concrete, and not even a moment later, the lion daemon had recoiled as though struck, the snarl in his throat turning into a cry of shocked pain in a voice that was suddenly so *young* and *afraid* sounding that she swore something in her heart tried to break itself in half at the sound.

"*Buffy!*" Willow's cry of alarm and the sight of the *blood* that had spilled out onto the concrete from the Slayer's *head* sent Cordelia's mind into a state of disbelieving shock.

The lion—whose fur was covered in old, faded scars if you just looked closely enough, who never showed fear, *ever*—was struggling to stay on his feet even as Buffy's head *was bleeding* and she *wasn't moving* just a few feet away, was struggling to snarl as intimidatingly as he had before, still trying to protect *her* and *her daemon* even though there was something seriously *wrong with him*, before he could *hardly keep himself from falling over under his own weight*, and—

—And then Guy's daemon released Branshen, and turned with a shriek of rage and triumph and *power* to attack him—

And something snapped inside Cordelia Chase.

Her voice rose from her chest like a roar, and it suddenly didn't *matter* that her shoulders hurt where Branshen had been stabbed, it didn't *matter* that

there was going to be a bruise on her arms the next day from where Guy had grabbed her.

Because one of her arms was free now, and her cousin had taught her how to punch when she was little, and Guy's daemon wasn't even paying attention to Branshen anymore.

Most people liked to assume that he was just another house cat. They liked to assume that she was another empty-headed cheerleader, with barely enough weight inside her brain to keep her on the ground.

If they underestimated them...

Well, that was their problem.

Before the red-headed brainiac even made it to her friend's side, Branshen's had leapt into the air, Cordelia's hand flew out, and both human and daemon's attacks reached their targets.

Kraelara was slammed to the ground beneath her jungle cat's paws, his snarling teeth held only a few breaths over her head, the advantage now in his playing field.

Cordelia's fist struck Guy square in the solar plexus, below the chest, but above the abdomen, just like her cousin had taught her, and she knew that, on the ground, Branshen was digging his claws just far enough into the falcon's wings that she knew not to even *think* about moving.

And now the lion—Hawnu—had stumbled away from them, and oh *god*, there was *blood* on the sidewalk because *Buffy had hit her head on the bench and now she wasn't moving* and her daemon looked *so terrified*

and *hurt* and *scared* and *confused* and, and he was *falling*, and for a single, terrified, *absurd* moment, Cordelia Chase wanted to leap shove Guy away the way he'd done to Buffy, and leap forward to catch the lion in her arms before he'd hit the ground.

She wanted to rescue him like he and Buffy had rescued them so many times before.

But then Zirena—Xander's striped hyena—was there, diving for the lion before he could fall over entirely, pushing her weight against him to keep him standing, the mane along her back standing entirely on end like a mohawk, her ears pressed flat to her skull and a high whine of distress in her throat.

Willow's raven was flapping and squawking in alarm over their heads, doing nothing more than drawing attention to what had happened—which, Cordelia conceded, looking at the freaking *blood* on the sidewalk from the Slayer's *head*, and the way her daemon had *collapsed*...was probably a good thing.

Buffy and her daemon were being taken care of. Even now, more people were rushing over, the nerds and the geeks, anxious to help, while the jocks just stood back, anxious indecision clear on their faces. Run forward to see if they could do anything to help, and risk their reputation by getting involved with the school pariah, or repay the debt they *all knew they owed her*?

Some of them gave in. Some of them ran back toward the school, running to alert teachers, and one of the wealthier ones pulled out her cellphone, and started

dialing 911.

And Branshen still had his claws deep in Kraelara's wings, and Guy was still standing there, doubling over, his arms wrapped around his chest, wheezing for the air that had been forced from his lungs by her punch. Her cousin had trained her well.

A vicious snarl that none of the other students heard in the commotion of worry over Buffy—because people were shouting now, in fear and anxiety, because *shewasn't moving*, and her daemon's body was twitching and jerking like he were having some sort of fit, and *no one knew what to do*—ripped itself out of Branshen's throat, and Cordelia felt her heart starting to pound all over again in her chest, racing faster than she could count, her skin tingling and crawling and her stomach churning with abject, blood boiling *rage*.

Because Guy was so freaking full of himself and convinced that the world revolved around him that he'd gone ahead and bragged to all his friends that he was going to meet Cordelia Chase—voted the school's hottest girl—at the Bronze. He'd probably told them over and over again exactly what he was going to do to her. She knew his type, and she knew that, had she shown up, he would have asked for more than she was willing to give.

He'd set himself up to fail, and he'd tried to take it out on her.

Only someone else had gotten hurt in the crossfire. And that was something she couldn't stand for.

Her hands clenched at her sides, and her teeth bared themselves in a feral mirror of her snarling daemon.

What happened next was a blur. One moment, she was standing there still, her back still pressed to the tree—and the next...

...The next moment, Guy Matthews was on his side on the ground, and his nose was broken and streaming blood, and Branshen had torn into one of his daemon's wings with his claws, and the feathers were littering the grass, and her leg was pulling itself back, preparing to lash out at Guy's futilely protected stomach—and then *Xander* was there, in front of her, and he was holding her arms, and he was trying to *stop her*, and his fingers were directly over where Guy had grabbed her, cutting into the bruise that hadn't even formed yet, and *Zirena* was trying to push Branshen off of Kraelara, and the hyena was shouting and snarling and trying to shove her daemon away, and Xander was trying to stop her from hurting Guy, and *all she could see was red*, and agony was tearing through her, and she realized rather abruptly that *something* was sticking to her side, and the heaving in her lungs and the throbbing in her head wasn't just from the anger coursing through her veins.

Her head swimming, Cordelia blinked blurred eyes away from Xander's face to look down at herself.

Even though her thick yellow coat, red blood was visibly spreading out across her side.

"I..." Her voice trailed off, not even sure what she'd meant to say in the first place. Her vision swimming

before her eyes, she shoved Xander away with all the force she could muster—because he'd *betrayed her*, he was the reason this had *happened to her*, and she couldn't stand to look at him, even when the world was spinning—and opened her arms just in time for Branshen to leap into them, his claws digging into her coat, his face pressing against hers, his fur tickling her nose and lips, his anxious purring rumbling through his chest into hers as though to force her heart to keep beating even though it felt like it was breaking.

Because she'd fallen in love with Xander Harris. She'd fallen hard. And then she realized too late—after she was ready to give her everything for him, her reputation, her heart, her *money*—that he didn't feel the same way about her that she did him.

Zirena had never felt the same urge as Branshen had to sneak closer to him when they were just lying with limbs entangled for the peaceful pure comfort of it, and brush his whiskers against the hand he had draped across the sofa. He had never wanted to trust someone else *so much* that you would let them touch your *soul*. Cordelia had never fallen in love before, and now it felt like her heart would never heal itself. Bits and pieces of it were dripping from the hole that had been torn in her side.

Because she knew now, what would have happened had Branshen dared to reach out for that peaceful hand.

Her daemon in her arms, his claws in her coat, clutching at each other as though the world would try

to tear them apart, she stumbled them away from Xander Harris and the bleeding Guy Matthews, the world swimming and swinging around her, until her legs gave out from beneath her, and she fell to her knees at Buffy Summers' side. The crowd, the flock of anxious students parted before her, with gasps of fear and terror at the sight of the blood staining her side. They didn't know what had happened. None of them did. They didn't know that she was bleeding from a broken heart and a soul that had been torn to shreds. All they saw was one student bleeding and unconscious on the ground—*Buffy Summers* bleeding and unconscious on the ground—and another about to pass out too.

Branshen pulled his claws back in, and leapt drunkenly from her arms to stumble to the fallen lion's side, his paws slipping and sliding on the red—oh god, there was so much of it—that stained the sidewalk, his legs unsteady beneath him as one of her hands went out of its own accord to Buffy's shoulder, her face twisting in sickening pain and worry, because the Slayer *wasn't moving* and she'd *never* seen her get hurt before, and something deep inside her heart was panicking with fear.

"*She's hurt.*" She whispered, her voice sounding like it was from a thousand miles away.

Darkness was dancing in front of her eyes, and someone's hands were on *her* shoulders, gentle hands, and then Giles' voice was there, sounding somehow both worried and calm, as though he knew that everything was going to be alright, even though

things had descended into a downward spiral faster than Cordelia could ever have imagined, because now three students were injured, *including* herself, and she could barely think straight, and she didn't even know why she was holding onto Buffy's shoulder as though her life depended on it, but the Librarian's hands were gently pulling her away, and his daemon—his daemon, the great grey owl so beautiful and wise and *sad* that from the first moment Cordelia had set eyes on her, it felt like she were staring at a soul older than existence—was urging Branshen away from Hawnu, urging him to her side, to her arms, to not worry, because help was on its way, they were all going to be fine.

Cordelia turned her head to look at him, his face close to hers, his eyes searching her face, her eyes, for any sign of injury, the light reflecting off the lenses of his glasses and making them almost seem to glow gold as he spoke, his voice gentle and soft and caring, "Cordelia, listen to me," He said, still gently tugging on her arm so lightly that it didn't even hurt at all, "Paramedics are on their way, alright? I just need you to move aside for me so that I can get to Buffy."

His request was so reasonable, and the pain in her side was so terrible that she listened. She allowed him to pull her just far enough to her feet that she could sit down on the bench *that had started it all*, the world almost tilting to the side before someone—Oz? Was that Oz? When had Oz gotten there—caught her before she could fall.

It *was* Oz. Through her dazed eyes, she caught sight

of his hair shining in the sunlight, as orange as fire, his daemon—a ferret with almost cinnamon colored fur on her back, and darker chocolate along her legs and tail, Traianel—perched on the shoulder farther away from her, her small black eyes gazing down with undisguised worry at the fallen Slayer.

A sudden pain stabbed at her side, and she gasped, but it was only the other student pulling her coat away to press something—was that a *gym uniform*—against her side to stem the flow of the blood that had soaked through her shirt, his eyes—an impossible color somewhere between green and grey and blue—drawing hers to his as he spoke, his voice quiet and firm and as calm as though nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. "Keep pressure on this," He said, lifting her hand in his own to replace his on the shirt he'd pressed to her side, "To stop the bleeding."

She nodded, her gaze drawn irrevocably back to the fallen Slayer.

Branshen was still crouched next to Hawnu, resisting all of Arethousa's attempts to draw him away, his fur on end and shaking from head to toe as he pressed his forehead into the lion's jaw, desperate for him to awake.

Cordelia didn't understand what was happening. Less than five minutes before, and everything had been fine. And then Guy stopped her, and started arguing with her, and now...

The feeling in her body was starting to return, the

warmth of the stone beneath her, the pain in her hand from where she'd punched Guy, the sunlight on her skin, the golden trickle of fur against her skin that flickered to her from Branshen's side of their bond, Oz's shoulder against hers, the only thing keeping her upright, though if anyone had asked her a year, or even *months* before if she'd ever allow herself to be caught *dead* sitting with something like him, she would have laughed, and laughed, and *laughed*, because the thought was so ridiculous.

But not anymore. Not after they'd both been betrayed by the ones that were supposed to have loved them. Not when Xander and Willow were just *standing* over there with the rest of the students afraid to get too close, their daemons ducking and cowering in shame when her blurred eyes swept over them, not when her side was bleeding out her blood and her *broken heart*.

She'd been trying so hard for so long to pretend that she was okay. To pretend that Xander hadn't meant anything to her at all. She'd tried to get back into her old group, the girls she'd known since kindergarten, only to be turned away with laughter and sneers at her weakness, and not even Branshen's grace had been enough to convince them to let them reenter the fold. Her parents scoffed at her in disbelief when she told them what had happened, their only concern about how much the hospital bills were going to cost them.

But no matter how hard she'd tried to hide how she felt, she *knew* that she had loved Xander Harris with all of her being. She knew that, if they hadn't found

out that *he and Willow* were cheating on them, that within a month, Branshen would have found the courage to creep closer to those fingers that felt so good when they carded gently through her hair, until there was nothing in between them. She knew that she'd betrayed herself just as much as he had her.

Because she'd allowed herself to fall in love when she'd known, from the very beginning, from the looks her friends gave her when they found out, from the whispers she'd heard behind her back every time she walked down the hall, or into a classroom or into the bathroom, the hidden glances, mouths covered with a hand to hide their words, eyes peering at her when they thought she couldn't see them, that it couldn't last.

At some point, she'd closed her eyes, and drifted off into the fog of her mind, because the next thing she knew, a paramedic was gently helping her into a gurney that had been rolled up to the bench behind her, and she was watching as Buffy Summers was loaded onto a stretcher of her own, her face pale and her hair caked with blood, and Gile's glasses still flashing gold in the sunlight, his expression grim and so, so *old* and *sad*, just like his daemon's, that she was forced to look away, and allowed the paramedic to gently convince her to lay her heavy head down, wanting nothing more than to sink into unconsciousness right then and there, if only to escape the sorrow that was drowning her heart.

Then Branshen was there, and he was curling into her neck, his tears soaking into her skin, still trembling,

still afraid, and unable to control the flood of bitter sorrow that had overtaken them as two of the paramedics and their daemons helped to lift Hawnu onto a stretcher.

Then the world was spinning around her again as the gurneys—five of them, because Guy had somehow passed out too, and his daemon had fainted, and Buffy and Hawnu would never have been able to fit on just one like she and Branshen could—were rolled across the uneven gravel path, before they were loaded into the back of an ambulance.

Tears of pain and fear stung at her eyes at the now-familiar ceiling above her as the rescue vehicle started off down the road, sirens blaring for all to hear, even as the paramedics rushed around her and Buffy. It had only been a few weeks since she'd last been carried away in an ambulance, and the tears that rolled down her face and the hiccup that caught in her chest weren't born from simply physical pain. It felt like her heart was breaking all over again.

Then Buffy's eyes started to flutter—Cordelia hadn't taken her eyes off her for a second—and her face twisted in pain, a small gasp of anguish left her, and Cordelia realized with heart-stopping, gut-wrenching *horror* that Hawnu had been too big to fit in the ambulance with them.

The paramedics had dealt with these sort of situations before. They were assuring Cordelia before she could even comprehend that *they were talking to her* that the driver behind them was keeping well in-range of their bond.

But Buffy had tears in her eyes, and her hands were reaching, weakly, blinding, for her daemon, *and he wasn't there*, and there was still blood in her hair, and on her head, and this had happened to her *because she'd tried to help them*, and in an instant, before either of them realized what was happening, what he was doing, and what she was giving up, Branshen wavered to his feet, and leapt across the other stretcher, and pressed his face into the Slayer's cheek.

A jolt shot through Cordelia's chest like an electric shock against her heart, and the air caught in her lungs as an indescribable feeling of absolute *trust* washed over her.

The paramedics didn't react at all, outside a slight pause in quiet surprise, before they were moving again, bustling about, checking readings on some machine, telling her they were going to have to lift her shirt away to look at her side, their gloved fingers cold against her skin even as her head swan more than ever before, the darkness of exhaustion held at bay only by the feeling of *warmth* that radiated out from Branshen's side of the bond.

She closed her eyes, and knew without even needing to look that Buffy had fallen back into stillness, one of her hands curled limply into Branshen's fur, her tears fading into nothing.

And Cordelia knew what people would think when they found out. She knew what people would think when they found out that she had let her daemon touch Buffy Summers. She knew how they would

react when they found out she broke the taboo more intimate than sleeping with someone. They'd call her a freak, they'd call her a dyke, a lesbian, *but it wasn't like that*.

This had nothing to do with sex. This had nothing to do with *anything* aside from comforting an injured girl—the same girl that had saved all their lives more times than any of them knew, the girl that was the only thing standing between them and facing the same fate as the decimated groups of students that had graduated every year before them—because she couldn't reach her own daemon, and *they owed it to her*.

But it was more than that. It was more than *owing* it to her. Cordelia knew, in that moment before she allowed herself to give into the exhaustion tugging at her limbs and itching at her eyes, that there was no one she trusted more in the world to protect her soul than the Slayer lying across the ambulance from her. She knew, even as her mind faded into the bliss of sleep, that Branshen would be safe when she woke up.

And then she slipped under the ocean of fog that had clouded her mind since the world had literally fallen out from beneath her, and Cordelia Chase knew nothing but the simple peace of knowing that you were truly safe in the world.

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